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ABSTRACT

The use of volunteers in special libraries is advocated in this report, which cites positive reasons for including volunteers among the library staff. (Bringing on volunteers during a budget crunch is not considered to be a positive reason.) The special library's relationship with the larger organization's volunteer department is mentioned as a key factor in creating a positive framework and solving organizational problems. Topics to discuss during an interview are suggested to help address mutual expectations before the volunteer assignment begins, and resources to make available to new volunteers are described--e.g., annual reports, department's procedure manual, articles on the history of the library. Some of the tasks highlighted as appropriate for volunteers include writing, collection development, and working with microcomputers. The levels of responsibility for regular staff and volunteers are differentiated, and other aspects of the relationship between staff and volunteers are explored. It is concluded that volunteers have been underutilized in libraries due to lack of expectations and limited vision of staff, and that volunteers may be one key to strengthening the library's commitment to the user. (6 references) (SD)

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KEEPING THE SPECIAL LIBRARY-VOLUNTEER INITIATIVE GOING

Anne M. Fredenburg

Paper presented
at the
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of the
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KEEPING THE SPECIAL LIBRARY-VOLUNTEER INITIATIVE GOING

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There are 19 million volunteers in America! 19 million people who act out of choice, of their own free will, to work without monetary pay. This is a truly American phenomenon. Alexis de Toqueville referred to the good will of Americans in his book, Democracy in America, and other writers have noted the place of volunteerism in history, as well. Historically, volunteers were pioneers who saw a community's needs and worked to fill those needs.

In recent years, we've heard about the demise of volunteerism in our country for a variety of reasons, which I won't discuss today. I am here to testify, though, that there is good news--Volunteerism is alive and well and at work in libraries. The use of volunteers in public, school and academic libraries is well documented; articles chronicling volunteers in these types of libraries have focused on their roles in fund raising and literacy programs. We special librarians, working in smaller spaces and with less staff, also need reminders about this viable and vital link to our goals of efficient and effective service and delivery of information to our clientele.

I am an enthusiastic proponent of volunteers in general and volunteers in special libraries in particular. What I tell you today is designed to motivate you in one of 2 ways: 1) If a volunteer program is lacking in your library, I urge you to implement a volunteer program and view volunteers as supplements to existing salaried staff; or 2) If you've given up on using volunteers and dropped your volunteer program, I urge you to transcend past experiences and recharge your volunteer program. In either case, this volunteer-special library initiative says TEAMWORK.

I speak from experience as both a volunteer and supervisor of volunteers. In preparing this talk, I have talked with volunteers and other supervisors in a variety of libraries and information centers. I ask you to accept three conditions from the outset, regarding administrative issues and volunteers:

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1. For any program's success, an administrative mandate is necessary. Administration must be receptive to having volunteers in the organization and commit time and money to training and supervision;
2. Regarding confidentiality of proprietary information - Volunteers are no more likely to discuss confidential issues or projects than are salaried staff;
3. Skepticism about abilities of volunteers vs. salaried staff - Monetary pay does not mean that a hire is a better worker or that a volunteer takes the job less seriously than does salaried staff.

A volunteer program is worthwhile and has merit. Here is information that can apply in your own employment situation. These may be new ideas or reminders of old ideas you've heard before. My focus is on human resources issues and viewing volunteers as part of the special library's TEAM.

WHAT CAN VOLUNTEERS OFFER?

What can you and your library gain from having volunteers? There are many good reasons to tap this work force. Before sharing those reasons, I want you to know the one negative reason to have volunteers, which is during a budget crunch, when a hiring freeze is in effect. Calling for volunteers when funds are lacking to hire paid staff implies that volunteers are second choice and no one wants to be considered second choice! Volunteers do offer many pluses to the library, and these are:

- As a powerful marketing tool which brings a larger "community" to the library in a different way. "Community" is used here in the broadest sense. Volunteers lend credibility because they are unsalaried. The benefits of a positive community relationship cannot be overlooked (relate to working in a psych. hospital).
- Less pressure on the job means volunteers can achieve and accomplish as do paid workers.
- Positive effect on salaried workers who may change their perceptions about voluntary workers as they see that volunteers do the job, enjoy it, and work willingly because they are not paid.
- Volunteers have an objective viewpoint because they are not full-time employees; this can be a positive influence on policy making.
- Because they are not full-time, they should be free to criticize and have their criticisms and suggestions heard.
- Powerful advocates for the library. As volunteers increase their knowledge of the parent organization (business, hospital, law firm) there are a greater number of potential advocates for the library and the parent organization.
- Try out new products and services - Doing special projects that have languished on "wish lists" and possibly justify an increase in staff.

- For the good of the library/information profession - To provide new and different perspective, added learning experiences for staff and volunteers. Sharing is rejuvenating! An offshoot of this is that folks outside our profession see what we really do and rid themselves of stereotypes about our profession.

WHY VOLUNTEER?

What do volunteers gain? There are many benefits.

- To expand his/her knowledge base - Learn about a subject, such as mental health, law, business, manufacturing, library administration, food technology, etc.
- Personal enrichment - Interest in resources on site related to job seeking, taking on a second vocation or keeping skills sharpened with changing technology.
- An extension of #2 - To use normally inaccessible, specialized books, journals, AVs in the collection. (Relate story of one library volunteer who took this one to the limit, neglecting her volunteer assignment in favor of getting lost in the stacks reading!) Also, for community citizens touring our organization and discovering what treasures of information are in the library, we encourage volunteering to use library's resources in-house.
- Investigate new fields or career transition by having work experience not otherwise possible. Examples: At least 2 volunteers wanted a picture of working in a library before deciding to attend library school; and a high school student interested in health care spent her free time reading about mental health.

The special library is a microcosm of many library and information service activities. In a larger academic or public library these activities are departmentalized to

a greater degree, i.e. cataloging is entirely separate from reference services. But in the special library, we do it all in a compact area.

- For internship - To try on a job without making a long-term commitment. If the intern is a capable worker, a place can be made later for the intern in the organization.
- Increase the possibility for employment through networking, making contacts, building confidence==Personal marketability! I can testify to the effectiveness of this benefit, as my current position is a result of volunteering in the library which I now direct!

A PROFILE OF VOLUNTEERS

Who are these library volunteers? As with our employees, library volunteers vary in age groups, professional interests and outlook. There are 3 general age ranges:

1. Adolescent/young adult - ages 14-22
2. Adult/middle age - 25-55
3. Retirees - 60-85

I can't claim the 80+ year olds for our library, though we currently have 2 volunteers in their 70s. There are a broad spectrum of business interests and professions represented, such as these: a business executive; an electrical engineer who worked on the DC metro in his former life; a chemical engineer for the Army, who bought a microcomputer at the age of 62, taught himself to use it and wants to keep his skills up-to-date; a retired school librarian with talents for displays and writing; a secretary for the B & O railroad who loves typing; homemakers wanting outlets from small children; a licensed practical nurse investigating other fields; teachers; lawyers; a journalist in training, etc.

Internships provide experiential learning and cover many fields. One community college student did a mental health practicum. A graduate student in library science did a special project related to collection development during an abbreviated internship. High school students come to us through summer CETA programs coordinated by county or federal agencies or through private schools in Baltimore which extend the opportunity to volunteer to their accellerated senior students.

With some businesses and law firms (in the Baltimore area) now "adopting" junior and senior high schools, the issue of minimum age is being challenged and discussed. Our hospital's law firm is grappling with this issue. This firm has recently partnered with a school in Baltimore City and is looking at ways to implement a program for student-volunteers.

One statistic is worth noting here: 80% of older volunteers stay and 20% change with most of the 20% in the category of students. If we think again about reasons to volunteer, this statistic should not come as a surprise.

RELATIONSHIP WITH VOLUNTEER DEPARTMENT

How is it that we have such a talented and eclectic group of volunteers? Our success is not due to the library's efforts alone. Credit goes to the top-notch volunteer department for creating a positive framework and solving organizational problems. The library works in tandem with this department, which has a strong commitment from top administration. It is our first line of defense, functioning as a personnel department in recruitment, screening, initial interviewing and coordinating periodic evaluation.

This department has position descriptions for library volunteers, which are used in initial screening of applicants. These PDs force the library to look seriously at volunteers' tasks. They also educate the volunteer coordinator about the library, structure the interview and formalize the library's volunteer program. The volunteer coordinator provides a preliminary idea of an applicant's capabilities, goals and interests. Library staff then brainstorms how this applicant would best fit in with our activities and goals. An interview follows, along with a tour of the library. Interview topics include:

1. Past work experiences, skills
2. Preference for working with others vs. working alone
3. Our library's environment--few windows, sloping ceilings, narrow space, smoking or non-smoking, as area can be claustrophobic
4. Number of volunteers and salaried staff who may be working when the applicant prefers to volunteer
5. Particular interests in this job
6. *Mutual expectations* - BE CLEAR on this point from the beginning to minimize disappointments and time wasted in training.

Addressing mutual expectations is especially important, because it indicates that the volunteer applicant and library staff will be comfortable working together.

The library director has the final decision to accept applicants for volunteer assignments. This means not accepting some applicants, for the good of the library and the volunteer. We've had as many as 10 volunteers during any one week and now hold steady with 5-6 weekly. Maintaining a master schedule of volunteers is beneficial to keep track of their schedules and minimize overlap.

Once there is agreement to "hire" a volunteer, a written or verbal contract usually follows to begin the working relationship. This contract covers a time commitment, and, for interns, should probably be written to spell out expectations and job duties, according to the school's requirements.

I recommend an orientation to the parent organization, which establishes that the volunteer is a vital part of the organization's TEAM. This concept of teamwork is later reinforced during the library's own orientation, individualized for each new volunteer.

ORIENTATION TO THE LIBRARY

As with any new worker in the department, volunteers are oriented to the library. Orientation may be concentrated over a limited number of days, or it may be interspersed with job assignments, depending on the number of hours per week arranged with the volunteer. We've found some in-house resources to be useful in educating new staff and volunteers about our library. These resources are:

1. Department's policy & procedure manual - the volunteer reads for an overall sense of the library's organization, to gain a sense of topics in the manual and where to find them, and the manual's value in the library for staff training--all of which eliminates spoon feeding information to the volunteer.

2. Orientation sheet - Included in policy & procedure manual; checklist of resources and readings.
3. "WELCOME" sheet given to new staff
4. Books on history of our hospital and its founder
5. Annual reports
6. Articles for Public Relations Dept.'s newsletter about former chairman of the board, his philosophy, outlook, etc.
7. 2 articles on history of the library, its collection and luminaries in the field.

A tour of the library and office should include pointing out the volunteer's work space, such as a desk and phone, if available, or a selection of work areas. Each volunteer needs a "home" of some type; this "home" could be a section of a desk, a bulletin board for notes, a drawer or a file folder for work assignments or projects in progress. Of course, introductions to other staff and volunteers are in order to solidify the concept of teamwork. And, the volunteer should have time scheduled with the library staff who will supervise and work closely with him or her. This library staff supervisor could be the library director, librarian or library assistant. I recommend assigning 2 staff per volunteer, with one staff as primary supervisor and the other staff as backup. This spreads responsibility for volunteers among all staff levels and broadens commitment to volunteers throughout the department.

VOLUNTEER TASKS

Just as there are no libraries exactly alike, there are also no generic position descriptions for volunteers in libraries. Tasks are as diverse as the programs and projects of our parent institution. To keep volunteers coming back, they must share challenging tasks, as well as the nuts and bolts that keep our daily operation functioning. Nuts and bolts refers to clerical tasks, such as typing, filing, answering phones, and data entry. Interns, especially, may balk at these tasks, but they, too, need a complete picture of the library's operation, and, to some degree, be a part of that operation at all levels of work.

Because of our volunteers' varied backgrounds, abilities and interests, they have done some projects which I consider unusual and unique, such as:

- Writing - monthly newsletter called "News & Reviews" for all employees, which includes abstracts and evaluations of resources;
- More writing! Original articles profiling the development of the library for our department's manual and outside publications;
- Collection development and evaluation - Statistical reports and pinpointing topics needing attention to keep the collection current and relevant;
- Microcomputers - ILL networks, word processing and developing in-house databases;
- Contributions to policy & procedure manual - Writing procedures for new sections, such as monthly SDIs, and testing these sections on staff or new volunteers, so this manual remains a useful training and referral tool.

Volunteers generally participate in, but don't have responsibility for, projects or ongoing activities. This is due to the complexities and deadlines of projects and also because they are not regular Monday-Friday employees. As a result, they don't see all of

their tasks through to completion. Because they have just a piece of the action, it is important to communicate to volunteers how their specific tasks fit into broader-based projects, other jobs in the department and general library operation.

Our volunteers and staff made four suggestions to effectively use volunteers in the library:

1. VARIETY - Volunteers strongly agreed that a few varied tasks keep their assignments interesting.
2. Don't overwhelm them with too many tasks at one time. Consider the degree of difficulty of each task and strike a balance.
3. Tap their expertise and special interests - This is flattering, enhances their self-esteem, and adds to the spirit of teamwork. It currently applies to our volunteers' work with displays, databases and detail-oriented tasks.
4. Maintain a "Wish-List" of future projects to which all may contribute ideas. Examples include articles about the library, beginning an archive and developing 2 in-house databases of federal publications and videotapes. You never know when a volunteer with special ability and interest will appear and fit a "wish-list" project. So, be ready for this golden window of opportunity!

RELATIONSHIP OF VOLUNTEERS & LIBRARY STAFF

The degree to which salaried staff accept or reject volunteers is crucial to the success of the library's volunteer program. Negative staff attitudes are usually based on unsuccessful experiences in which volunteers were unsuitably used. Staff may be unsure of how to deal with an unsalaried worker, may lack training in overseeing volunteers or there may have been inadequate preparation to integrate volunteers into the library's activities. Whatever the reason, the issue of staff acceptance must be addressed.

The library director sets the tone. The director is responsible for educating staff about working with volunteers and maintaining morale of both salaried and unsalaried workers. In order to have staff "buy into" a volunteer program, the library director would get a running start by sharing some "pay-offs" for individual employees. These "pay-offs" are not the same as benefits to the organization, which I've already described. In her book, From the Top Down, Ellis refers to these eleven payoffs:

- Supervising volunteers demonstrates managerial ability
- On-the-job training for supervising employees
- Help employees see their work in a new way, a fresh approach
- Reduce staff isolation by sharing staff interests
- Volunteers test an employee's new idea and prove its worth
- Lessen the employee's work load
- Free employees to do things they are specially trained for or like to do
- Reduce employee tension and burnout
- Stimulate creativity for new ideas or staff innovations
- Handle work for which employees not as well suited/trained
- Personal enrichment for staff, due to volunteers' differences.

Ideally, volunteers should work with professional and clerical library staff. It should be understood that supervising volunteers is part of everyone's job. To formalize this understanding, add a line item in each staff person's performance plan referring specifically to training and supervising volunteers. Most staff, salaried or unsalaried, don't have natural ability to supervise. Supervisory talent does not come through osmosis, but is developed more by the library director's example. Library staff must be taught how to supervise, evaluate and integrate volunteers effectively on the library's team.

PLANNING is vital! Don't waste volunteers' time from your lack of planning. I want to emphasize that! Staff must plan tasks for volunteers, just as a teacher writes a lesson plan or a library director prepares an agenda for a staff meeting. A written plan ensures appropriate use of volunteers for priority projects in the library and minimizes interruptions for staff. The volunteer's schedule is written by the primary staff assigned to that volunteer, with input from all staff. All salaried staff who have worked with a volunteer contribute to that volunteer's annual evaluation. This evaluation is based on performance, formalized in writing and reflects the same high standards as for staff.

HONORS AND AWARDS

Staff deserve rewards for their work with volunteers. More often, a system of rewards and honors, if in place at all, will recognize volunteers' participation and achievements and neglect contributions of staff. The Cargill book in your bibliography suggested staff recognition awards which are also applicable to volunteers. These awards include employee/volunteer of the year, most valued, attendance, outstanding student, and years of service. Presentation of awards would probably be at large organization-wide events, such as receptions and dinners. Awards could be certificates, pins, or other gifts. Volunteers in our hospital are invited to annual dinners and are honored for hours or years of service.

The Volunteer Department celebrates volunteers and staff once a year during National Volunteer Week. Activities range from pins for volunteers and supervisors, to beautiful posters and a special issue of the newsletter focusing on volunteers and former volunteers. By far the favorite -- lunches and dinners to which volunteers invite their supervisors!

Still, ongoing recognition is what keeps volunteers coming back for months and years. These smaller-scale rewards are at least as valuable to retain volunteers, at no-cost or low-cost to the library:

- Thinking of volunteers as part of the TEAM
- Calling volunteers by name
- Offering to provide references
- Incorporating volunteers in an advisory capacity
- Including them in staff meetings and planning
- Common courtesies - Thank you, hello, goodbye
- Compliments in front of others
- Letters to administration, department heads about their performance
- Parties - Christmas, birthday, etc.

One of our volunteers calls these the "perks" or "fringe benefits."

CONCLUSION

The rewards are there, but a successful volunteer program does not come from spontaneous combustion. It requires commitment of time, money and staff throughout the organization. It also requires having a structured program in place, making plans and strengthening the concept of TEAMWORK.

Volunteers have generally been under not overutilized in libraries, due to lack of expectations and limited vision of staff. Expand your vision! And, remember, that in this age of technology, it is important not to overlook the human interaction in our work. Library clientele still appreciate and benefit from contact with staff. The need for staff in the special library continues apace with the electronic innovations of the last few decades. A commitment to volunteers addresses part of that need and, thus, is one key element in strengthening the library's commitment to the user.

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"Keeping the Special Library-Volunteer Initiative Going"
Anne M. Fredenburg

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